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ABSTRACT

The reader response criticism that has arisen in direct response to the New Criticism can be adapted to the needs of the developing writer through its emphasis upon the experience of the reader engaged with the text. The reader response approach generates content--helps the developing writer find something to say--and facilitates the process wherein literary content, or what is happening to someone else, makes writers remember what happened to them. Students, instead of writing critiques, can write response statements that record the perception of a reading experience and its natural, spontaneous consequences, among which are feelings or effects, and peremptory memories and thoughts, or free associations. Developing writers can improve style by discovering patterns in literary sources through imitation or through emphasizing the response to literary forms. Class assignments may move from complete emphasis upon the experience the literary work evokes to emphasis upon the experience of the text. In summary, the inventive application of the principles of reader-response criticism can make writers out of developing writers. (EL)

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VARIETIES OF LITERARY EXPERIENCE FOR THE DEVELOPING WRITER

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CS 209 400

I'm indebted to William James not only for the title of this paper but for its unifying idea. In The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902), James makes no attempt to analyze institutional religion; he limits his study to personal religion, in which "the inner dispositions of man himself . . . form the center of interest, his conscience, his deserts, his helplessness, his imcompleteness." James offers an "arbitrary" definition of religion: "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine." My aims are, of course, much less grandiose than James's, but I, too, wish to take a look at what has, for the most part, been overlooked.

Just as James focuses on "subjective" religious experience and the various forms it may take, so I wish to discuss "subjective" literary experience, the various forms that it may take and, most importantly, the ways such experience may initiate and direct the writing process. Just as James sets aside institutional religion to focus upon experiences that have not been validated by it, so here I will, for the most part, bypass traditional, institutionally approved methods of literary analysis.

In case you consider this paralleling farfetched, consider how much the psychoanalyst Simon O. Lesser, speaking of another personal experience, the reading of literature, sounds

like the psychologist James speaking of religious experience. According to Lesser, "we read because we are beset by anxieties, guilt feelings and ungratified needs. The reading of fiction permits us, in indirect fashion, to satisfy those needs, relieve our anxieties and assuage our guilt." Perhaps, then, we turn to God and literature for very much the same reasons. Of course, not everyone turns to God spontaneously, just as not everyone reads willingly. To take the analogy to its extreme: the teacher who brings literature into a classroom of developing writers may find himself among a group of infidels. And conversion is always a matter not only of tact and patience, but of ingenuity. In teaching, as in proselytism, the strategies one uses to convert must be as radical as the situation demands, as unexpected and forceful as the level of resistance requires. I will be arguing that those aspects of literary experience which have been outlawed from the classroom are the very aspects of literary experience which the teacher of developing writers must insist that his students exploit. To make James's "arbitrary" definition of religion into an equally "arbitrary" definition of literary response: it is the feelings, acts and experiences of individual <u>readers</u> in their solitude which those readers--our students--should be asked to draw upon when they write.

It is only a relatively small group of relatively recent literary theorists who would applaud this manipulation of James. The teaching of literature has long been dominated by

the New Criticism, and teachers of literature have long been warning their students of the dangers of the Affective Fallacy: "the error of judging a work of art in terms of its results, especially by its emotional effect." The term was introduced by W. K. Wimsatt, Jr., and M. C. Beardsley to describe the "confusion between the poem and its result (what it is and what it does)." A work of literature, then, is a sacrosanct object, a "verbal icon," and the critic must in effect suppress his experience as a reader when writing about it; he must strive for emotional detachment, for a scientific attitude, for objectivity. Ironically, then, when someone argues that it is inappropriate to use literature to teach writing, especially developmental writing, he probably means that students do not learn to write by being taught traditional literary criticism. And they don't, simply because traditional critical techniques force students to suppress their experiences as readers. It is often further argued that developing writers do not have the discipline, the sophistication, to regard a literary text "objectively." But I want to make clear that I'm advocating here a "subjective," "reader-oriented" approach to literature, not because it is easier for the developing writer, but because it is more desirable. The New Criticism is no longer "new"; more important, it's no longer the only acceptable methodology. In fact, a movement has arisen in direct response to it; I am speaking of Reader-Response Criticism, and it is this critical position--with

its emphasis upon the reader and the reading process--that allows us to break down the artificial boundaries which the New Criticism erected between the text and the reader, that permits us--encourages us, in fact--to return literature to the writing classroom.

The link between Reader-Response Criticism and developmental writing can be located in a single word: experience. Recently, Ken Bruffee neatly summarized the goal of the curriculum model developed by the CUNY Writing Task Force: "to help students learn to respond to issues discoverable in firsthand experience (defined as reading as well as everyday occurrences)[and] formulate a generalization in a rudimentarily unified and coherent essay." The ascent from "experience" to "generalization" described by Bruffee is, I feel, analogous to the ascent from "data" to "idea" described by Mina Shaughnessy: she writes that "ideas generally seem to be spawned in data--whether the data be fragments of remembered sensations or opinions or the carefully wrought texts of famous writers."

I did say "ascent" from experience to generalization, "ascent" from data to idea. It seems to me that for the process of writing at the developmental level, the best paradigm is a simple spatial one. First, the student labors at the "bottom," gathering and analyzing data. Next, he moves "up," formulating a generalization (topic sentence, thesis statement) about that data. Then, the student moves back "down": using

the original data, new data or a combination, he explains and defends that generalization. Firsthand experience provides data, and reading literature is both experience of another's experience and firsthand experience in its own right. Too often this second aspect has been overlooked, both by teachers of writing and literature and by their exalted counterparts, literary critics. Reader-Response Criticism offers an alternative to traditional literary analysis that can easily be adapted to the needs of the developing writer: the emphasis is not upon the text but upon the experience of the reader engaged with it.

Reader-Response Criticism is not monolithic; it is perhaps even less unified with regard to both theory and practice than the two schools of criticism with which it is contemporaneous and from which it borrows heavily: Structuralism and Deconstrictive Criticism. But this diversity is an advantage, especially to those of us whose primary academic role it is to teach. I have been stressing the radicalism of Reader-Response Criticism, but here I would like to use a very traditional critical distinction, that between "content" and "form," to demonstrate the efficacy of this approach when working with developing writers. First, I'll show how the Reader-Response approach generates content, how it helps the developing writer find something to say. We have just seen that Shaughnessy considers firsthand experience one of the starting points for the developing writer, that Bruffee

considers it the starting point; and I doubt very much if there is any writing teacher, of students at any level, who has not asked his class to write from experience. Directions such as "Write from experience" and, to quote any CWAT exam, "Explain and illustrate . . . from your own experience . . ." are deceptive. They sound simple, straightforward, humane even, but there are two assumptions underlying them which I think are rarely considered: first, that the student knows which of his experiences are suitable; second, that he has a clear memory of his experience. One of the important things that literature does for all of us is validate our experiences; it not only enables us to recall them, but it reassures us of both what is unique and what is universal in them. Applied Reader-Response Criticism facilitates the process wherein literary "content" evokes experience, wherein what is happening to someone else makes us remember what happened to us. In his Subjective Criticism, David Bleich describes his strategy of having students write "response statements" in lieu of critiques in the manner of the New Criticism. "A response statement," according to Bleich, "aims to record the perception of a reading experience and its natural spontaneous consequences, among which are feelings, or affects, and peremptory memories and thoughts, or free associations." In other words, he tells his students to write about almost everything they are usually told to ignore. It makes no difference whether or not a student fully understands what he has read.

(I told you this would be a radical approach. But I think that the Deconstructive critics are right when they say that every intepretation of a literary work, every "reading," is essentially a "misreading." I do realize my bias here, though. I'm a writing teacher, not a reading teacher: I'm much more interested in generating content than I am in testing my students' comprehension. But errors in reading often lead to exuberance in writing. A small example, from a member of the DES reading faculty as a matter of fact: On an exam, when asked to discuss the "differences" between two characters, one student wrote about the quarrels they had. Perhaps this should be a minor addition to Harold Bloom's famous Map of Misreading.)

Probably many of you are thinking that a "response statement" is so open-ended an undertaking that it may inhibit a developing writer, no matter how provocative the literature he has just read. In developmental education there is, as you know, a great deal of emphasis put upon discrete units, upon sequenced instruction. I've had my students write response statements in a developmental sequence. I got the idea for this sequence while doing a little research into the emergence of the concept of the "reader" as active participant in literary production.

Before "Reader-Response" emerged as a species of literary criticism, the psychoanalyst Lesser divided the reader's imaginative activity into three categories: identifying, analogizing, evaluating. In "identifying," the reader sees himself

both in the characters and in the characteristics encountered in a literary work. In "analogizing," the reader relives experiences or indulges in fantasies that parallel narrative incidents: he may also re-create a literary event--substitute a happy ending for a sad one, let's say. In "evaluating," the reader confronts his own values--as well as preconceptions, prejudices, and so on: encountering unfamiliar or unpalatable ideas forces the reader back upon himself, generates comparisons, self-analysis. Lesser's categories help a student come to grips with, to acknolwedge and articulate, his response; discussing these categories is in fact one way of guiding a student through the process of introspection that a literary work stimulates. Through freewriting, "clustering" or brainstorming (tape-recording is also useful), introspection becomes objectified; the student generates his own data. And the movement from "identifying" to "analogizing" to "appraising" provides the student with a sequence of progressively more difficult writing tasks: he has to look more and more deeply into himself and more and more deeply into the text. Whether "identifying," "analogizing" or "appraising," the student writes a generalization based upon his own response, and then he explains and supports that generalization by selecting material from his data base. More than one generalization is possible, of course, as is more than one selection and arrangement of material for a particular generalization. What we have, then, is a movement away from the content of a text to the content of a response to that content.

But I did promise to discuss "varieties" of literary experience; so I don't intend to limit myself to a discussion of "content," though there is much more to say. Just as I approached content from a double perspective, I wish to view "form" in regard to both the literary text and the developing writer's text. I'll discuss first a very familiar connection between the "form" of what we read the the "form" of what we write. To a great extent, reading teaches writing. That we imitate what we read when we write is perhaps another way of saying the same thing. The developing writer can discover syntactical patterns in literary sources. Imitation soon leads to manipulation. A compressed poem, for example, can serve as raw material for sentence construction and sentence-combining. A book like Scholes and Comley's The Practice of Writing contains many exercises of this type, but they are easy and fun to invent. And there's a certain economy here: the same work of literature to which a writer has responded can help that writer to shape his response.

David Bleich's "subjective criticism" is directed primarily toward content, as we have seen. Other approaches emphasize the reader's response to formal elements. Stanley Fish, for example, describes a literary statement "as an action made upon a reader rather than as a container from which a reader extracts a message." He bases his course on the simple question, which he and his students attempt again and again to answer: "What does that ----- do?" The blank is

filled in with words like "sentence," "paragraph," "poem," "story"; the units becoming larger as the semester progresses. Fish remarks that such close attention to literary forms leads to an improvement in style: "Not incidentally my students become incapable of writing uncontrolled prose, since so much of their time is spent discovering how much the prose of other writers controls them, and in how many ways."

I have adapted Lesser, Bleich and Fish to the needs of my developing writers, and my assignments move from complete emphasis upon the experience that the literary work evokes all the way to the other end of the spectrum: complete emphasis upon the experience of the text, upon what it is doing to us. A traditionalist might argue that this is nothing to brag about, that all I have accomplished is moving my students from the Affective Fallacy to the Intentional Fallacy:"the error of judging the success and the meaning of a work of art by the author's expressed or ostensible intention in producing it." But the focus at this stage is not upon the intention of the author but upon the action and reactions of the reader, not upon the meaning intended but upon the effect produced. So students have not simply inched away from solipsism into a kind of impressionism; they have travelled a far greater distance: that between subject and object, between autobiography and exegesis. Close regard to what the text is doing immerses the writer in the world that text evokes. And at this point I'm willing to admit that something more traditional is appropriate.

Formulating generalizations based upon a "response" necessitates little risk: since every response is unique, there is no "right" answer; since it is subjectivity that is being drawn upon, positions are "private" rather than "public," and so invulnerable to argumentative counterresponses. As the student gains confidence, though, he can become more deeply involved in literary texts and confront issues about which there is general concern. In effect, the student begins to practice a simplified version of traditional literary exegesis. For example, he may write a generalization about a character based upon data the text provides. At this point, generalizations become riskier: different students come up with different interpretations of the same data and the need for support and development is more felt. To return to my spatial paradigm: it is the "content" of literature that is primary as the student moves "up" to his generalization, whether he is responding to the text or arguing from it. It is the "form" of literature that assists the student on the way back "down" through his support and explanation: that is, it functions both as a series of models and as raw material for syntactical experimentation. To encourage this "decentering," techniques developed in Gestalt Therapy prove useful: "scripting," in particular. A student writes a dialogue between two characters, becoming each character in turn. He fills in a narrative ellipsis, or rewrites the end of a story, and then argues for it as more appropriate than the original. I have also tried giving my

students beginnings, asking them to write the rest of the story, at least in synopsis form, and then to argue for the appropriateness of their continuation. Often, success is a matter of presenting a text in a different context, or, more specifically, to remove it from the original context. I've recently used portions of Ulysses and the Canterbury Tales, reducing descriptions of place and character to lists, and having the students generalize from these lists. (What's amazing is how unintimidated they are by a text when it is given to them piecemeal and how much their interpretations are in line with traditional readings.)

I have more to say about specific assignments, but unfortunately no more time. I've referred to the importance of choosing texts which are strong, which are provocative with regard to both content and form. Obviously, the more insistently a text speaks to a writer, the more readily it will exert direction. Perhaps because I am a modernist, I find modern literature most efficacious. Speaking as a teacher of modern literature, Lionel Trilling has said: "No literature has ever been so shockingly personal as that of our time--it asks every question that is forbidden in polite society. It asks us if we are content with our marriages, with our family lives, with our professional lives, with our friends. . . . [T]he questions asked by our literature are not about our culture but about ourselves. It asks us if we are content with ourselves, if we are saved or damned--more than anything else, our literature is concerned with salvation."

The literature that Trilling is describing is not merely a modern phenomenon (innovation or aberration, depending upon your point of view)--it may be the writing teacher's single most valuable resource. (It is, I feel, our students' birthright.) I realize that much more research and thinking has to be done with regard to integrating developmental writing and Reader-Response Criticism, but the kind of approach I have been advocating may be the best technique for getting our students to do what they resist doing: to take a good look both inside themselves and outside themselves. I am not merely suggesting a way to prevent someone who is a teacher of developing writers by day and an aspiring literary critic by night from becoming completely schizophrenic--but a way that allows the teacher/critic to draw upon his training and research while directly benefiting his students. As I hope I have begun to show, the inventive application of the principles of Reader-Response Criticism can make developing writers writers.

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